

SMI is Like Watching Your Child Drown Slowly

By: Jennifer Hoff

When our son, Matthew, turned 18 he was free to make his own medical decisions, including discontinuing treatment for his bipolar disorder and other mental health problems. We tried unsuccessfully to get him back into treatment, but he wasn't considered dangerous or gravely disabled enough.

It's like watching your child drown slowly.

Less than four months after turning 18, Matthew was arrested for the first time, entering a cycle of homelessness, incarceration, hospitalization, release and re-arrest. Matthew's fourth encounter with the law occurred mere weeks after being released from a residential treatment facility for mentally ill teens; he walked into a bank and demanded \$1,000 on a sticky note.

Now he is serving fifteen years in prison, much of which he spends in isolation. Assisted outpatient treatment, known as Laura's Law in California, could have prevented Matthew's deterioration by allowing court-ordered outpatient treatment to help him stay compliant with his treatment plan and stop him from cycling between hospitals and jails.

But it has been 12 years since California passed assisted outpatient treatment (AOT) and many counties have not passed AOT or not yet fully implemented the program for people like Matthew.

It's hard for me to understand that anybody questions the value of mandating treatment for the most severely ill. It's a horrible, horrible illness, and to leave people in psychosis on the streets is unconscionable, but we do it all the time.

Thank you.